

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

COMMUNITY FORUMS AND FOCUS GROUP PANELS On behalf of the City of Austin

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Prepared by Group Solutions RJW



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INTRODUCTION

Group Solutions RJW was hired to engage the African American community in dialogue in response to questions about the quality of life of African Americans in Austin. As in other communities, questions about race and equity had been raised many times, in many ways.

The *City of Austin's African American Quality of Life Scorecard*, published in March of 2005, revealed some positives. African Americans in Austin had higher incomes, were more educated, and had lower poverty rates than African Americans in 28 comparable cities. However, the scorecard also found that African Americans significantly trailed Anglos on each of the indicators measured and that the City lacked a cultural and social infrastructure that creates a sense of belonging among African Americans.

Facilitated discussions, or forums, provided an opportunity to hear diverse African American voices, to listen to the collective reality of being African American in Austin, and to discuss actions to improve the quality of life of African American Austinites. But, the discussions have done more. They have encouraged a much broader discussion. Representatives of the media have attended forums and communicated in a way not done before. Conversations have broadened beyond the forums. Neighbors have chatted informally with neighbors. City leaders from other communities have telephoned to acknowledge similar situations and to talk about Austin's approach.

The stage has been set for something special to happen. Austin is known as a "city of ideas." The City's quality of life is touted as among the best in the country and Austin is recognized as a great place to work, live, and to do business. This latest conversation speaks to the imagination, determination, and compassion of Austinites and offers the opportunity to more closely align the quality of life of all Austinites.

METHODOLOGY

Six facilitated discussions targeted African American students, corporate citizens, community leaders, professionals, native Austinites, religious and socially involved Austinites, entrepreneurs, artists, and others. Each forum consisted of a panel of eight to 12 participants and standing room only crowds. Sixty people served on focus group panels and more than 700 participated as audience members. Written input was solicited from audience participants and more than 250 written comments were received. Seventy-five responses were received by website and e-mail.

Facilitated discussions were held from April 25 to April 29, 2005.

GUIDING QUESTION

The consultant was charged with using forums to explore quality of life challenges and identifying recommendations that could be translated to specific, sustainable actions appropriate to the City of Austin. City leaders were especially interested in determining what local government could do to retain and attract African Americans so that the city maintained a diverse economy and culture.

A brief discussion about how recommendations were developed is appropriate. To facilitate action, the City asked for a finite number of recommendations that could be accomplished within a designated timeframe. Working on an initial set of recommendations would not prevent the City from undertaking a second set of recommendations after the first had been completed. However, the tactic would ensure focused attention and results.

The consultant responded to these requests. The collective concerns and challenges communicated during the six forums are reported in the next section of this document. Some challenges may be broader than the ability of the City of Austin alone to remedy. However, they are presented here in hopes that others will join in the discussion and in the problem solving begun by the City.

At the conclusion of forum, a quality of life solutions group assisted the consultant in taking the many, many ideas of forum participants and website responders and focusing them into a priority set of recommendations to the City.

THE COMMUNITY TALKS

Group Solutions RJW asked focus group panelists and audience participants about the quality of life for African Americans in Austin. In response to the question, “Do African Americans experience challenges different from others in Austin, panelists and audience members overwhelmingly answered “yes”. When asked to describe challenges and opportunities, and to suggest ways Austin might retain and attract African Americans, respondents provided many insights. The following themes and ideas are a broad representation of those key points shared through comment cards, website responses, and verbal discussion.

1. The community identified eight areas of challenge. These were a welcoming environment, arts and entertainment, police interactions, jobs, investment in East Austin, housing, education, and business and economic development.
2. Many variables influence the attractiveness of a city, including educational opportunities, cost of living, social outlets, housing options, availability of appropriate religious institutions, job and business opportunities, and the “openness” of the community. Openness in this context refers to a welcoming environment or, said another way, an environment that fosters the feeling of belonging.

3. For many African Americans, Austin is not a welcoming city. Crucial to a sense of belonging and an inviting environment is the availability of African American art, and culture and recognition of African American history and contribution.
4. African American culture and history are not very visible. Few African American artists are featured at Austin museums and galleries, particularly local artists, even at facilities supported by tax dollars. African American history and culture are not used as convention and tourism attractions, and African American influences are missed when Austin's history is discussed. The Tom Joyner Show, a nationally syndicated radio show very important to many African Americans, is not available in Austin. Programming for African Americans, particularly on public airwaves like KLRU, KUT, and public access TV, is limited or non-existent. Equally troubling to African Americans is that few places exist where African Americans can connect with other African Americans. Entertainment venues that appeal to predominantly African American audiences are very limited. Midtown Live has for years been only one of a very few African American social clubs. One panelist talked of moving to Austin from a smaller town and expecting to find a more developed African American cultural and social scene. She was disappointed to find that so little existed in Austin. Another panelist expressed disappointment to find that cultural and social options were so much more limited than those in Dallas and Houston, even when expecting fewer options because of the comparable size of the cities. Taken together, the situation makes African Americans feel undervalued.
5. Limited social options are even more problematic for African American students and young professionals. While college age youths and young singles are not solely interested in social interactions, these interactions are an important part of linking to one's culture, to maturing, and eventually to marrying and beginning families. One young participant said, "This conversation is about so much more than the club scene."
6. Despite the city's billing as "the Live Music Capital of the World", African American musicians, film makers, promoters and, in some cases, patrons are not embraced as a part of Austin's emphasis on live entertainment. Music promoters discussed the difficulty of securing venues for their acts. They spoke of issues like higher security requirements (a cost factor), lower crowd capacities (a revenue impact), and high venue costs. They spoke of the unwillingness of venues to book their acts and of the reluctance of venue owners to have too many African American patrons for fear that the venue would turn "Black", causing Anglo patrons to stay away. Participants were frustrated that nationally recognized events like South by Southwest (SXSW) and the Austin City Limits Music Festival include too few African American acts, and those that are included are difficult to identify. These, and similar, events are missed opportunities. Fans from across the state and country come to Austin for these events. With little effort, the appeal of these events can be extended to African Americans, both those who live in the city and those outside Austin.

7. The City of Austin has existing venues that offer wonderful opportunities for African American artists and film makers to showcase their works and network. However, for these venues to fulfill their potential for African American artists, there has to be a commitment to showcasing the works of African American artists and entertainers.
8. Midtown Live is an important Austin venue and one that participants want preserved. A significant number of forum participants viewed the City's participation in the rebuilding of Midtown Live as a matter of equity (i.e., tax dollars are often used to stimulate economic development).
9. There are many African American community and cultural assets that, if better publicized, would bring African Americans to Austin and support opportunities for African Americans to interact. These include Huston-Tillotson University, the new George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, the Millineum Youth Entertainment Center, Doris Miller Auditorium, community redevelopment and investment along the East Eleventh and Twelfth Street corridors, Mitchie's Fine Black Art and Gift Gallery, Midtown Live, Women in Jazz activities, Pro Arts Collective, MLK Day and Black History Month celebrations, East Side Story, W. H. Passion Historical Society, historic East Austin, the African American media including NOKOA, the Villager, and KAZI (88.7), Diverse Arts, local restaurants, and Austin's talented African American artists, musicians, and entertainers.
10. Participants were anxious to better publicize and showcase Austin's African American assets. They advocated developing a promotions campaign that celebrated Austin assets and marketing those assets to African Americans both inside the City and outside. Other ideas of merit included the creation of an African American cultural district, preparing a brochure for Austin newcomers highlighting cultural and community assets, and publicizing events and assets on the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau (ACVB) website.
11. Community and cultural resources that are important to African American conventioners and tourists are the same resources that are important to African Americans who live in Austin. Improving the social infrastructure for local residents will improve Austin's attractiveness to newcomers and tourists.
12. Police-community interactions impact the perception of whether a community is welcoming. African American visitors attending events like Texas Relays or the Battle of the Bands judge the openness of the city by the behavior of police officers. Potential conventioners assume that the police comments associated with the Midtown Live fire reflect the sentiment of other officers. Corporate recruits may decline offers to relocate to Austin because of perceived racial intolerance and companies may not consider Austin as a relocation option because of the need to recruit a diverse labor force. Therefore, police-community interactions not only impact how Austin is perceived, but have financial implications as well.
13. Police and community relations were brought up in each of the six forums. The relationship described between African Americans and the police was a complex one. The question asked by one participant, "When are we as a people going to be able to feel safe in our own community?" speaks to that complexity.

On the one hand, participants want their neighborhoods and homes protected, as do other Austinites. On the other hand, participants speak of police being a hindrance to feeling safe. Participants felt that police assume that African Americans are going to cause problems and officers behave accordingly, even when a problem doesn't exist. This puts officers and African American community residents at odds even when there is no real problem. "Young Black males especially are more likely to be stopped while driving and subjected to search." Participants were not convinced of the police department's ability to police their own and viewed the Austin Police Association as a hindrance to improved relationships.

For African Americans, the issue is one of respect and fairness. Participants spoke of police insensitivity and racial profiling, words not likely to be used by others in Austin. But, participants wanted a better relationship between police and the African American community. One participant suggested a code of conduct for officers and young adults. Others offered suggestions for relationship building and suggested expanding opportunities for the police to interact informally with African Americans in community settings. Participants suggested activities like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), visiting churches, block parties, and festivals. The goal of activities was for both residents and police to see each other in a different light.

14. Access to jobs and job discrimination are major concerns. Participants told of looking for jobs for months without success, of families being negatively impacted because of low wages, and of a husband and wife being separated because the husband had not been able to find a job in Austin. "If African American men can't get jobs to support their families, the family unit breaks down. When the family unit goes, the community goes." Participants wrote of large local businesses where no African Americans were visible and of how the move to privatize state jobs had a disproportionately damaging effect on African Americans because government had historically been a larger employer of African Americans than the private sector. Participants spoke of "being the last hired and first fired" and having little or no recourse. One participant wrote, "Forget the social scene. Talk about Black graduates and job opportunities!" Hiring and retention practices in the City's Fire Department were raised. Participants spoke of the need for mentors to advise, coach, guide, and serve as role models and of the absence of strong African American leadership within organizations. They desired training opportunities that offered access to higher-level jobs, and training and internships for young people that positioned those young people for employment once they finished school. Finally, comments reflected the link between low wages and lack of job opportunities with other community challenges such as poor housing choices.
15. East Austin is very important to African Americans' sense of belonging. East Austin has historically been home to the majority of Austin's African Americans. Even today, when most African Americans live outside of East Austin (and Northeast Austin), the neighborhood still has the largest concentration of African Americans in the city. When wanting to connect with the African American community, newcomers and residents alike return to East Austin. Most African Americans attend religious institutions in East Austin and find it an important connection.

16. East Austin and its African American residents face many challenges. Property taxes are rising faster than salaries, and gentrification is a pressing problem. "...Blacks that live in this area can't afford it. Other races are moving in and taking our historic Black land." "Taxes are too high and forcing people out of their homes," summed up several participants.

Small businesses are also impacted by rising costs, participants reported, stating that costs are too high for small business owners and for residents who want to start businesses. Finally, participants stated that inadequate code enforcement impacted the physical environment of East Austin and contributed to community problems. Participants wanted property owned by the City to be kept mowed and debris free, for land owned by the City to be put back in the hands of African Americans, and for the City to enforce codes that would improve community appearance.

17. Many African Americans would like to relocate businesses and families to East Austin. The City can build on existing efforts and encourage continued reinvestment in East Austin by facilitating infrastructure improvements such as sidewalks, street improvements, new housing starts, and the location of commercial ventures to the community.
18. Austin needs to increase investment in housing strategies that provide affordable housing within the corporate limits of the City, encourage more housing options in East Austin (including options for middle and upper income African Americans), and assist people in staying in their homes, particularly elderly homeowners. Buy-down programs and property tax exemptions were cited as possibilities.
19. African Americans live all over Austin. Access to affordable housing options, jobs, and other basic needs is important, regardless of where residents reside.
20. A quality education for African American youths is a community priority. Forum participants acknowledged that public education is the responsibility of the local school system and not the City of Austin, but insisted on discussing the topic. Participants communicated an extreme frustration with the Austin school district and its education of African American youths, and with the disparity between schools in east and west Austin. Participants want the Austin school district to use more creative strategies to address the problems of underachieving students, such as putting the best teachers in low performing schools and offering job training for students who are not college bound.
21. Forum participants believe that the City of Austin has an obligation to be part of the education solution and that the City has a vested interest in helping to address the problem of under performing schools. One suggestion was to tie funds that the City gives to the Austin Independent School District to performance criteria. Another was to challenge local corporations to support programs that produced a quantifiable improvement in African American academic achievement. A third was to establish more collaborative partnerships between the City of Austin and the Austin school district, making school district cost savings available for academic purposes.

22. African American students offered many insights and suggestions on the issue of retaining African American students in Austin. They suggested internship programs that lead to permanent employment and communication tactics to ensure that African American students were aware of the opportunities. They suggested that corporations more actively recruit African American students attending local universities and that local universities actively recruit African American high school students from Austin. Students suggested that mentoring programs begin early and that college students and corporate recruits could meet personal needs to form relationships and help build the community by participating as mentors, a win-win opportunity.
23. Economic development strategies have not traditionally targeted the strengths or needs of East Austin. As a result, there is underutilized human capital in East Austin and other African American communities in Austin. Many of those born in Austin have not benefited from Austin's economic success.
24. Forum participants believe that corporate incentive packages should be directly tied to offering job and business opportunities to African Americans. In the negotiation of previous incentive packages, African American interests were not considered. Participants want African Americans involved in discussions when corporate recruitment packages are negotiated.
25. Despite the presence of business development organizations such as Business Investment Growth (BIG), Austin Community Development Corporation, and other micro lending programs, there seems to be a lack of available information regarding lending programs, training, and assistance for African American businesses.
26. Access to capital is a significant contributor to the health and vitality of African American businesses. Participants suggested creating a task force to explore ways to increase capital access for African American businesses. They spoke of the need for low interest loans to assist start-ups, and opportunities to provide higher risk loans. They discussed strengthening and expanding programs that allowed contractors to borrow funds against awarded contracts.
27. The City, through its M/WBE ordinances, plays an important role in strengthening African American business. These ordinances create an important link between minority and majority businesses and help ensure that business opportunities provided by the City benefit African American and other business owners. Participants expressed concern that some doing business with the City do not comply with City ordinances and suggested that contracts be monitored for compliance and incentives and penalties used to encourage compliance. Participants acknowledged that enforcement tools are already in place, but noted that more resources need to be devoted to ensure enforcement.
28. Small business, with smaller contracts and project liability, are contractually required to maintain the same levels of insurance as larger, more financially exposed contractors. City contracts also mandate health insurance requirements beyond the norm of many small businesses. Such requirements place a financial burden on small businesses.

29. African Americans want to participate equally in the high quality of life that Austin offers. Past practices have placed the community at a disadvantage. Fostering parity with other segments of the community will require action. African Americans want an active voice in decisions that impact quality of life and to financially benefit from those decisions.
30. African American organizations – organizations such as the NAACP, Austin Area Urban League, Capital City African American Chamber of Commerce, Austin Redevelopment Authority, Austin Black Contractors Association, churches, Nation of Islam, fraternities, sororities, and many others – have worked tirelessly to improve African American quality of life and are ready partners.
31. Participants strongly encouraged the continued inclusion of the African American community as actions move forward, and expanding the existing dialogue to include a much broader audience. This broader audience included corporate and civic leaders, other governmental jurisdictions, and interested citizens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Group Solutions RJW thanks members of the quality of life solutions group for their assistance at the conclusion of forums. This group of African American business, civic, religious, and organization representatives assisted Group Solutions RJW in reviewing information from panelists, comment cards, and the website. With this community input as a guide, the group worked with the consultant to identify actionable recommendations as requested by the City.

After discussion and deliberation, solutions group members ranked suggested recommendations. Recommendations offered below reflect those that the solutions group members thought were of the highest priority. The complete compilation of solutions group recommendations and rankings are provided as an attachment.

The recommendations are as follows:

Arts and Entertainment

- (1) Develop a campaign to market Austin's African American culture, history, and other resources to African American's inside and outside Austin. Also, create an African American Cultural Arts District in East Austin that will formally preserve the existing landmarks (businesses, churches, Carver Museum and Library, Huston-Tillotson University, etc.)
- (2) Promote Austin's African American culture, history, restaurants, and events on the Austin Convention and Visitor Bureau (ACVB) website and in the Austin Official Visitors Guide.
- (3) Ensure an African American community liaison within the Austin Convention and Visitor Bureau to serve as a knowledgeable resource to the ACVB and African American community.

- (4) Include African American signature events (i.e., Texas Relays, Juneteenth celebration, Black History Month celebration, Battle of the Bands, Martin Luther King Day events, Heman Sweatt Symposium on Civil Rights, Barbara Jordan forum, KAZI Summer Fest) in ACVB promotional materials as a means of promoting the city and recruiting tourists.
- (5) For events and facilities that the City co-sponsors, funds, or supports (e.g., SXSW, Austin City Limits Festival, Austin Museum of Art, etc.), ensure that African American artists, musicians, film makers, and others are included and that events are publicized in the African American press and community.
- (6) Create an African American cultural fund for the marketing, support and production of current and new cultural events targeting African Americans.

Police Interactions

- (1) Enhance police training and provide clear directions by policy. Develop clear policies and training on de-escalation techniques and use of steps in the continuum of force. Offer cultural sensitivity training and partner with African American organizations to identify community members willing to participate in training scenarios. The same type of training should be provided to City employees involved in providing contracting opportunities to African American businesses.
- (2) Identify problem officers, document in personnel files patterns of inappropriate officer behavior, and appropriately discipline officers who behave inappropriately.

Housing and Commercial Development

- (1) Develop a comprehensive approach to address the City's role in tax related foreclosures, encouraging more housing options in East Austin, and related housing issues. Minimize gentrification by creating property tax exemptions for residents over a certain age, residents who have lived in the East Austin community for a certain period of time, or families with a certain medium income.
- (2) Bring the physical environment of East Austin up to the level of the physical environment in other areas using the arsenal of tools available to the city.
- (3) "Buy down" the cost of land in East Austin by making land currently owned by the City available to African American residents and business owners.
- (4) Encourage mixed use development in East Austin by improving streetscapes along commercial corridors, developing city financed parking, improving necessary infrastructure, and enhancing and expanding the existing façade improvement program.

Education

- (1) Increase collaborations with the Austin Independent School District on joint use facilities, after school programs, mentoring in low performing schools, and other efforts that improve education and reduce costs.

Employment and Economic Development

- (1) Partner with the Capital City African American Chamber and the Greater Austin Chamber to ensure business representation, recruitment, and retention strategies that reflect the needs of the African American business and East Austin community. Recruiting efforts should include businesses that can create and retain jobs with advancement opportunities for low tech, semi-skilled and non-technical workers.
- (2) Target for expansion and recruitment African American businesses that respond to the needs of the community for jobs and social venues. Use the incentives available to the City, such as fee reductions, tax abatements, and expedited site plans, to assist targeted businesses.
- (3) Link corporate recruitment incentives to specific hiring, contracting, and purchasing opportunities for African Americans. Specify hiring and purchasing goals that reflect the African American population in Austin. Tie corporate performance and compliance to incentives and penalties. Established African American organizations should be a part of this negotiation process with the City and the Greater Chamber of Austin.
- (4) Review the City's own hiring and compensation practices to ensure that African Americans are hired in appropriate numbers throughout city government and in decision making management positions that impact areas outlined in this report.
- (5) Expand programs to increase access to capital for African American businesses, and evaluate existing programs to identify opportunities for higher risk loans and low interest loans from banks, and to allow M/WBEs to use public contracts to either get a loan from an existing program, or an advance from the Banking institution where the City of Austin currently does business.
- (6) Enforce the City's M/WBE ordinances. Monitor contracts for compliance. Use incentives and consequences to encourage compliance with not only meeting, but exceeding M/WBE goals.
- (7) Adjust insurance and bonding requirements on advertised contracts based on the risk to the City of Austin and the value of the contract. The same insurance should not be required for contracts under a \$100,000 that would be required for contracts above \$500,000.
- (8) Increase access to information about small business assistance programs by listing programs on the City of Austin website.

Other Recommendations

- (1) Create a monitoring and review process that allows the City and the African American community to evaluate the success of changing the quality of life for African Americans.
- (2) Expand the quality of life dialogue to include additional African American organizations and individuals as well as the broader Austin community (e.g., corporate and civic leaders, interested citizens and others).

ATTACHMENT A

ATTACHMENT B